

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Tetanus (lockjaw)

What is tetanus?

Tetanus, commonly called lockjaw, is a bacterial disease that affects the nervous system. Due to widespread immunization, tetanus is relatively uncommon in the USA. It occurs more often in older people and in agricultural workers where contact with animal manure is more likely and immunization is inadequate. Use of contaminated needles can also result in tetanus (example: those used when injecting street drugs).

What are the symptoms and complications of tetanus?

A common first sign of tetanus is painful stiffness in the jaw muscles (lockjaw), followed by stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, rigidity of the stomach muscles, spasms, sweating and fever. Complications involve the respiratory muscles causing interference with breathing. Fractures of the spine or long bones, hypertension, abnormal heartbeats, coma, generalized infection, clotting in the blood vessels of the lung, and pneumonia can occur. One out of every two people with tetanus will die from it.

How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

The incubation period is usually 10 days but may range from three days to three weeks. Shorter incubation periods are associated with wounds that are heavily contaminated with tetanus bacteria.

Does past infection with tetanus make a person immune?

Recovery from tetanus may not result in immunity. Immunization is indicated even after recovery from tetanus disease.

What is the treatment for tetanus?

Wounds should be thoroughly cleaned, and dead tissue removed. For minor and clean wounds, where the patient has had a primary series of tetanus vaccine but not had a tetanus booster in the previous 10 years, a single booster of toxoid should be administered on the day of injury. For severe or dirty wounds, a booster should be given if more than five years have elapsed since the last booster if the person has completed a primary series.

If the person hasn't completed a primary series of tetanus vaccine (toxoid), tetanus immune globulin (TIG), antitoxin or antibiotics may be given along with the toxoid. The American Committee on Immunization Practical guidelines should be consulted, or call Montana State Department of Public Health and Human Services Immunization Program at 444-5580.

Is there a vaccine for tetanus?

Yes, an effective vaccine against tetanus has been available for many years. It is usually combined in the tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis vaccine (DTP) and is routinely given to children at two, four, six and 15-18 months of age, and a booster dose given between four and six years of age (preschool booster). Children who are seven years of age or older should receive TD (tetanus and diphtheria) vaccine. A tetanus diphtheria booster shot is recommended for everyone, including adults, every 10 years to maintain immunity.

How can tetanus be prevented?

By being immunized against tetanus and maintaining a high level of immunization in the community. All puncture wounds, traumatic injuries and animal bites should be evaluated by a health care provider and cleaned. Persons unsure of their immune status should contact their doctor and should have an Immunization Record Card that documents when they received vaccination against tetanus.